A/AC.172/1993/CRP.6
30 April 1993

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMITTEE ON CONFERENCES
Substantive session
17-21 May 1993
Agenda item 4 (a)*

CONTROL AND LIMITATION OF DOCUMENTATION

PROVISION OF WRITTEN MEETING RECORDS TO SUBSIDIARY BODIES OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Note by the Secretariat

1. In paragraph 14 of its resolution 47/202 B, the General Assembly welcomed the decision of the Committee on Conferences to review the criteria for, status of and guidelines on the provision of written meeting records, and requested the Committee, taking into account the costs of conference-servicing, to report thereon to the General Assembly at its forty-eighth session with concrete recommendations. To assist it in its review, the Committee requested the Secretariat to examine and report on the criteria, status and guidelines that were the basis for prior recommendations to and of the General Assembly on the provision of written meeting records to its subsidiary bodies, and to include in its report an assessment of the current validity of the guidelines.

Criteria for the provision of meeting records

2. By its resolution 3415 (XXX) of 8 December 1975, the General Assembly adopted on an experimental basis a set of criteria for the provision of meeting records that can be summarized as follows:

(a) Meeting records shall be provided for the General Assembly and its Main Committees, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council and its sessional committees;

(b) Meeting records shall be provided for a limited number of selected subsidiary bodies of the General Assembly discussing matters of substantive importance, but only for meetings at which such items are dealt with. The

---

* A/AC.172/150/Add.1.

bodies concerned shall be required to dispense with such records for organizational, procedural and valedictory discussions and for the adoption of their reports, and be urged to dispense with them for substantive discussions of lesser importance. The General Assembly, in the resolution establishing a subsidiary body, shall decide whether its proceedings are of sufficient substantive importance; in the absence of an express decision, records will not be provided;

(c) The list of subsidiary bodies provided with meeting records shall be reviewed to see if it includes bodies whose meetings do not appear to have an important substantive character or for which the cost of providing records appears to be out of proportion with the possible benefit;

(d) Verbatim records shall be provided for the Trusteeship Council and for substantive matters discussed in the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space and the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples;

(e) The Secretariat shall issue the summary records of subsidiary bodies of the General Assembly in initial general distribution, subject to the issuance of corrigenda to remove serious errors only;

(f) Subsidiary bodies of subsidiary bodies shall not be provided with written meeting records;

(g) The other main organs shall be invited to observe the same criteria in deciding whether records should be provided for their subsidiary bodies;

(h) Summary records shall be provided for the Trade and Development Board and the Executive Board of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Governing Council of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

(i) Subsidiary bodies otherwise entitled to receive meeting records for all or some of their meetings shall be required to dispense with them when meeting away from recognized United Nations conference centres;

(j) In principle, summary records of the main organs shall be limited to 15 pages per meeting of 2½ to 3 hours, and efforts shall be made to reduce the summary records of subsidiary bodies to 10 pages per meeting of the same length.

3. In subsequent resolutions - 32/71 of 9 December 1977 and 33/56 of 14 December 1978 - the General Assembly modified somewhat the above criteria by urging bodies entitled to meeting records to dispense with them for particular discussions, whether of an informal nature or otherwise, when they are not absolutely necessary, and calling upon all United Nations bodies to review periodically, on the basis of statements of financial implications, the requirements for meeting records, to explore possibilities for reduced services with regard to records and to dispense, whenever possible, with meeting records.

4. The General Assembly returned to the criteria for the provision of written meeting records in 1982 when, in resolution 37/14 C of 16 November 1982, it decided that, for an experimental period of three years, no subsidiary organ of

the General Assembly should be entitled to summary records, with the exception of the seven organs listed in the resolution. The Assembly also decided that summary records should continue to be provided to regular and special sessions of governing bodies of certain United Nations organs and programmes and to pledging conferences or meetings of ad hoc bodies established for the announcement of voluntary contributions by States. In addition, the Assembly:

(a) Reaffirmed that no United Nations body or organ should have both verbatim and summary records for the same meeting;

(b) Decided that the exceptions granted to certain subsidiary organs would not apply to their subsidiary bodies;

(c) Reaffirmed that any further exceptions would require the explicit approval of the General Assembly in a pertinent resolution or decision;

(d) Requested all subsidiary organs entitled to written meeting records to keep their requirements for such records to a reasonable minimum, to dispense with them whenever possible, and to make wider use of sound recordings;

(e) Confirmed that summary records should not be provided to special conferences and their preparatory organs, with the exception of legal codification conferences, for which the needs would be determined in each case;

(f) Decided that subsidiary organs entitled to receive written meeting records should receive them when meeting away from recognized United Nations conference centres only if there was a specific decision of the General Assembly for each case;

(g) Requested subsidiary organs receiving written meeting records to avoid including summaries of discussions in their reports, unless such summaries were indispensable, by referring instead to the relevant meeting records.

5. In its resolution 38/32 E of 25 November 1983, the General Assembly restricted the practice of reproducing statements in extenso for all its subsidiary organs entitled to summary records, and in resolution 40/243 of 18 December 1985 it decided that the experimental arrangements for summary records established in 1982 should remain in effect until it took further action. A year later, by resolution 41/177 D of 5 December 1986, the Assembly extended for a further three years the experimental arrangements established by resolution by 37/14 C, with the exceptions thereto, invited governing bodies of United Nations organs and programmes to reconsider their need for summary records, decided that pledging conferences and meetings of ad hoc bodies established for the announcement of voluntary contributions should no longer receive summary records, and invited the Military Staff Committee to consider dispensing with verbatim records.

6. On 21 December 1990, by resolution 45/238 B of 21 December 1990, the General Assembly decided that, pending a further decision, no subsidiary organ of the Assembly should be entitled to summary records, with the exception of the following:

(a) Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean;

(b) Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People;

(c) International Law Commission;

(d) Legal Subcommittee of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space;

(e) Special Committee against Apartheid;

(f) United Nations Commission on International Trade Law.

The Assembly further decided that summary records should continue to be provided to regular and special sessions of the following governing bodies: the Executive Board of UNICEF, the Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Governing Council of UNDP.

7. As can be seen from the above, although over the years the General Assembly has modified several times the pattern of entitlements to written meeting records, it has not reconsidered the criteria on which such entitlements are based.

8. As regards the General Assembly's request, repeated in several resolutions, that organs entitled to written records dispense with them whenever possible, only one of the subsidiary bodies listed in resolution 45/238 B, the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law, has consistently complied, reducing its requirements as requested. The Assembly's call for a periodic review by the organs concerned of their requirements for written records, on the basis of statements of financial implications, does not appear to have been generally heeded, at least formally.

Rationale for meeting records

9. As considered by the Committee on Conferences at its substantive meetings of May 1982, the rationale underlying the provision of written meeting records could be characterized as follows:

(a) To enable delegations to have their positions on particular issues formally and authentically recorded in printed form in the working languages of the body concerned;

(b) To provide an authoritative account of all proceedings and decisions of a meeting;

(c) To facilitate future reference to discussions by providing authentic and officially issued texts;

(d) To enable delegations to follow developments at meetings accurately and to facilitate the drafting of reports by both delegations and the Secretariat.

10. While in general written records currently continue to meet the purposes enumerated above, some developments may have had the effect of making them less

essential than they might have been in the past. Chief among these is the fact that taped sound recordings, which provide an incontestably accurate and reliable verbatim account of all proceedings, are available almost instantaneously, are easy to duplicate and are far less expensive to produce. With some obvious drawbacks, such as the requirement of play-back equipment and the time involved in listening to a three-hour recording as compared to reading a 15-page summary record, taped recordings could be said to address the needs mentioned above.

11. A second consideration is the extent to which delays in the issuance of meeting records, particularly summary records, have come to detract from their usefulness. Meeting records that are not issued until months after the organ concerned has closed its session, while still providing an authoritative account of the proceedings for archival or historical purposes, will hardly enable delegations to follow developments at meetings or facilitate reporting obligations. On the other hand, since the essence of a body's proceedings, and certainly all its decisions, are contained in its reports, meeting records may not be indispensable in this respect.

Cost

12. In resolutions 3415 (XXX) and 33/56 the General Assembly made cost a consideration in the provision of written meeting records. Accordingly, it may be relevant to quote here the notional cost of providing such records:

(a)	Verbatim record in six languages	$16 600
(b)	Summary record in six languages	$10 200

13. Since the obligation to produce General Assembly plenary and Security Council records requires the maintenance of a permanent Verbatim Reporting Section in any case, it could be argued that adding or subtracting entitlements to verbatim records does not have significant implications. Summary records, however, are drafted and translated in the Translation Services, which have to detach staff from the translation of pre- and in-session documents for this purpose. An additional cost of summary records, therefore, is that the time spent by translators attending meetings and drafting and translating records reduces the staff capacity available for translation, usually at times when the volume of documentation is highest.

Current situation

14. By and large, verbatim records are prepared and issued in all languages within reasonable deadlines. Only towards the end of peak periods, after the verbatim reporting capacity of the Secretariat has been exceeded for some time, do delays occur. But any backlogs that may accumulate are usually cleared up shortly after the closing of a session.

15. The timely production of summary records, on the other hand, has become increasingly difficult over the past few years. The sharp increase in translation workloads, which have grown by over 20 per cent since 1988, compounded by the 17 per cent reduction effected in the staff resources of the Translation Services over the same period, has cancelled out almost entirely the Secretariat's capacity to translate anything other than pre- and in-session

documents. As a result, while original language versions of summary records can still be produced in a timely manner, translation into the other languages required has to wait until the demand for parliamentary documents slackens enough to release some capacity in the relevant services or resources become available for contractual arrangements, which may not happen until well after a session has ended.

16. Unless there is a considerable drop in documentation requirements in the near future, a development that does not appear likely at this point, the timely provision of summary records in all languages to those organs that are currently entitled to them would necessitate the allocation of more appropriate resources to the Translation Services. One possible option, in the current critical situation, could be to give summary records the more informal status of conference room or working papers and issue them in the original language version only, making sure that they are drafted in an appropriate balance of languages. Another option could be to waive the simultaneous distribution requirement for summary records, allowing the original language version to be issued within 48 hours of the meeting while the others wait until translation capacity becomes available.

Conclusions

17. The basic criteria for the provision of written meeting records continue to be the substantive importance of the matters discussed by the body concerned, and the cost of providing such records in relation to the possible benefit. The General Assembly has consistently reserved to itself the authority to decide whether the proceedings of a subsidiary organ are of sufficient substantive importance to merit the provision of meeting records, although it has repeatedly encouraged bodies entitled to such records to dispense with them when discussing matters that are not substantive or are of lesser importance or when written records are not absolutely necessary.

18. Similarly, the General Assembly must decide whether the cost of providing written records to any organ appears to be out of proportion with the possible benefit; but it has also called upon all organs entitled to records to review their requirements periodically on the basis of statements of financial implications. The Secretariat's capacity to produce meeting records, the conditions in which records are being produced with the resources currently available, and the effects of such conditions on the benefits derived from the records, could be considerations in any review of the costs and benefits of the provision of meeting records.

A/AC.172/1993/CBP.7
10 May 1993

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMITTEE ON CONFERENCES
Substantive session
17-21 May 1993
Agenda item 4 (a)*

CONTROL AND LIMITATION OF DOCUMENTATION

PROVISION OF WRITTEN MEETING RECORDS TO SUBSIDIARY BODIES OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Implementation of paragraph 18 of General Assembly resolution 47/202 B

Note by the Secretariat

1. In paragraph 18 of its resolution 47/202 B, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to pursue the possibility of issuing the verbatim records of the Security Council in final form only, on the understanding that these records would be issued as promptly as the provisional ones are at present.

2. In view of the importance of the prompt issuance of Security Council records, no specific proposals are being made to change current procedures until the new system for the production of verbatim records of the General Assembly has become fully operational. This is expected to be accomplished before the beginning of the forty-eighth session of the Assembly. In the light of actual experience in the preparation and issuance of the verbatim records of the General Assembly in final form only, an appropriately similar procedure will be pursued for the verbatim records of the Security Council.

3. Meanwhile, the secretariat of the Security Council has been requested to report any preliminary views that the Council may have on the possibility of having its verbatim records issued in the manner described in paragraph 18 of resolution 47/202 B.

---

* A/AC.172/150/Add.1.

A/AC.172/1993/CRP.8
30 April 1993

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMITTEE ON CONFERENCES
Substantive session
17-21 May 1993
Agenda item 4 (b)*

CONTROL AND LIMITATION OF DOCUMENTATION

Implementation of the rules and regulations on the control and limitation of documentation: compliance with the six-week rule for the issuance of pre-session documentation

1. By paragraphs 7-10 of its resolution 47/202 B, the General Assembly, inter alia, urged the Secretary-General to take necessary measures to ensure that pre-session documents for meetings are distributed no less than six weeks before the meetings in all official languages, unless there is a specific decision by the body concerned regarding the timing of issuance of pre-session documentation; urged substantive departments of the Secretariat to comply with the rule which requires them to submit pre-session documents to the Office of Conference Services (OCS) at least ten weeks before the beginning of sessions, in order to permit processing in time in all official languages; requested the Secretary-General, in the context of the measures mentioned, to review all of the factors involved in the timely issuance of pre-session documentation, including the quality and timeliness of submission to OCS, and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session through the Committee on Conferences.

2. The above-cited requests of the General Assembly focus primarily on Secretariat action to cope with the documentation workload. However, this issue is two-sided in that the initial requests for documentation, i.e., reports of the Secretary-General, emanate primarily from intergovernmental/expert bodies. There have been numerous appeals to Member States and to subsidiary organs aimed at limiting, wherever possible, the quantity of documentation to be processed within the Secretariat.

3. Most recently the General Assembly, on the recommendation of the Committee on Conferences, adopted paragraph 12 of the same resolution, by which the General Assembly urged subsidiary organs to review their agendas with a view to enabling the Secretariat to comply with the six-week rule, inter alia, through combining agenda items and limiting requests for pre-session documentation; and requested the Secretary-General to inform the subsidiary organs of this appeal and to report to the Committee on Conferences on the measures taken to this effect.

---

* A/AC.173/150/Add.1.

4. In order to comply with this request, OCS has communicated with the Heads of Departments and Offices and all Committee Secretaries in order to bring the relevant decisions, requests and appeals of the General Assembly regarding, inter alia, timely availability of pre-session documentation to their attention and, through them, to the attention of the intergovernmental bodies themselves.

5. The report of the Secretary-General requested in the above-cited resolution will be submitted to the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session through the Committee on Conferences for review and comment. The present report provides an outline for the study, which includes some indication of preliminary findings, as well as areas identified for further study. It is presented to the Committee on Conferences pursuant to a decision taken at its organizational session, held on 2 March 1993, to receive an interim report on the matter at its substantive session of 1993. The Secretariat looks forward to receiving the Committee's views and comments thereon.

6. The outline of the proposed study is as follows:

Part one

I. Definition of documentation policy

The attention of the Committee is drawn to the Report of the Secretariat as contained in document A/AC.172/141, of 7 August 1990, in which the Secretary-General presented a review of the implementation of all rules and recommendations relating to the control and limitation of documentation, with particular attention to the "six-week rule". It was reported therein, that directives for the control and limitation of documentation are prepared in response to resolutions and decisions of the General Assembly as well as on the basis of analysis by the Secretariat of its experience in processing parliamentary documentation. After review and approval by the Publications Board, the directives are issued by the Secretariat as addenda to the regulations for the control and limitation of documentation issued as administrative instruction ST/AI/189 on 7 November 1969. This series of directives also covers other aspects of the publications policy of the Organization, which is the subject of a report currently before the Committee (A/AC.172/153).

OCS will review and update existing editorial directives and manuals in order to assist staff of author departments who are assigned to plan, draft, submit and coordinate parliamentary documentation and to ensure that the quality, compliance with page limitations and deadlines for submission are in accordance with established procedure.

II. Factors involved in timely issuance

The stages involved in processing documentation can be subdivided into forecasting of workload, drafting and submission of manuscripts, and the processing within OCS for eventual issuance as documentation of the United Nations. On the one hand, these imply separate areas of responsibility between author departments (i.e., issues of quality and timeliness of manuscripts submitted for processing) and those of OCS (i.e., editing, translating, typing,

printing and dissemination). On the other hand, there are inter-related areas of coordinated responsibility relating to forecasting, planning and training.

The Secretariat will report on each of the stages involved in issuing parliamentary documentation and on the outcome of its analysis, including, as appropriate, action taken on proposals currently under consideration to address the situation in the areas of management, finance and procedures.

A main difficulty encountered and often reported on is the need to process priority documentation which very often necessitates postponing work on documents submitted in a timely manner. OCS will incorporate into the final report a representational breakdown of documentation workload using actual workload statistics and based on the theoretical assumption that no documentation was already in the pipeline at the start of the representational period. This portion of the report will include information on the number of pages of pre-session parliamentary documentation originally forecasted and actually submitted and the number of pages of priority parliamentary documentation submitted, as well as other documentation submitted during the representational period selected. It is anticipated that this analysis will clearly demonstrate the impact of priority documentation submitted with tight deadlines and of late submission of pre-session documentation on the documentation-processing services.

III. Prevailing situation with regard to timely issuance of documentation

The current situation with regard to compliance with the six-week rule has reached a critical stage. One primary factor is timely submission to OCS at least 10 weeks prior to the scheduled start of sessions, which in turn allows four weeks for OCS to complete the other required steps. When author departments fail to observe this rule, the turnaround time is reduced, which leaves OCS in a position where it in turn does not have sufficient time to comply with the six-week rule for issuance. As the number of documents submitted late increases, there is the resulting and persistent bottleneck in the documentation-processing pipeline, which increasingly places OCS in a position where it may knowingly have to set aside documents submitted early in order to address the priority created by late submission. In short, it is not always feasible to observe the six-week rule for one body at the expense of another - particularly one that is about to convene its session.

OCS has been able in many cases to take urgent action to deal with such occurrences by cutting document turnaround time to compensate for late submission. As a result of the increased volume of documentation to be processed in general, the late submission of some documentation and the increased volume of Security Council documentation that must be processed immediately, OCS' room to manoeuvre has all but disappeared. Thus, intergovernmental/expert bodies are experiencing an unacceptable situation where what was once considered to be an emergency, i.e., issuance of pre-session documentation when sessions start, rather than six-weeks in advance, is quickly becoming the norm, and the Secretariat must engage in exercises of crisis-management as part of its routine, rather than on an exceptional basis.

It may be said that the past biennium has been extraordinary and that much of this can be attributed to the impact of the new demands on and changing priorities of the Organization, and the subsequent restructuring of the Secretariat. This has led in some cases to increased workload in the author departments, and in turn in OCS, and to delayed submission and issuance of documentation. However, at this point there does not appear to be a basis for assuming that the net effect on documentation workload and its processing will improve.

Further, over the last year the staffing table of OCS has been reduced by 29 professional posts, and the possibility of further redeployments to other priority areas remains. Short-term solutions, such as a substantial infusion of funds for temporary assistance for crisis periods until the prevailing backlog could be cleared and the documentation process could be brought up to speed could be contemplated. This alone, however, would not address the larger problem described, and it may be anticipated that the overall situation would rapidly deteriorate again.

What would constitute a more practical solution is one that reflects the realities of the changing workload of the Secretariat as well as its priorities, a plan that addresses the role of the Secretariat as a whole in a systematic and comprehensive way, and one that holds institutional implications for the long term.

Once it is recognized that the documentation workload of the Organization is increasing, the role of OCS in addressing this is: to identify the resources necessary to manage it; to ensure that the workload is, to the extent possible, distributed evenly over the biennium; to make recommendations to and cooperate with, author departments as appropriate, on ways to improve the quality and timeliness of submission of documentation; and to seek the assistance and guidance of the Committee on Conferences in ameliorating this situation. In other words, OCS would pursue a multi-faceted plan of action aimed simultaneously at the areas directly within its purview as well as those such as forecasting, planning and training which, as indicated above, can be considered inter-related areas of coordinated responsibility between separate units of the Secretariat.

Part two

IV. Findings and recommendations

This section will include more formal recommendations of the proposals outlined in the relevant sections presented in the present report, including, but not limited to, the following areas of attention.

A. Coordination and training

As indicated above, a primary contributing factor to difficulty in the processing stages for a given document is the quality of the submission in terms of length, conciseness and uniformity in presentation for parliamentary documentation. It is believed, therefore, that a need exists for renewed and intensified training of staff in author departments assigned to plan, draft,

submit and coordinate parliamentary documentation in: editorial guidelines and directives of the Secretariat, rules and regulations for the control and limitation of documentation, format and style for reports of intergovernmental bodies and of the Secretary-General to intergovernmental bodies, and principles of report writing in general. This may be particularly true at this time in light of the prevailing situation of the Organization, the restructuring of the Secretariat, the reassignment of staff to new responsibilities, and the burden of additional work leading to less time for preparation of more documentation.

OCS has conducted preliminary consultations with the Office of Human Resources Management and will collaborate in the development of a training course on preparing parliamentary documentation as part of the communications component of the Comprehensive Management Development Plan already under way in the Secretariat. In a related matter, and as requested by the Committee on Conferences, the Secretariat, in cooperation with UNITAR, is incorporating relevant information in the training programmes for new delegates and Secretariat officials.

In addition to updating the relevant editorial directives, and guidelines for drafting of reports prepared by the Secretariat, OCS would provide further assistance by preparing supporting materials for the course curriculum, devising a standard format for reports, including those of the Secretary-General and of intergovernmental bodies, and participating as trainers in the course.

Clearly, this activity requires not only interdepartmental cooperation and support throughout the Secretariat, but in a manner and at a level consistent with the position that it is the role of the Secretariat as a whole to address the question systematically, comprehensively and as an institutional arrangement. OCS would suggest that while other drafting courses may be open to all staff on a voluntary basis, participation in these specifically structured courses would be mandatory for staff assigned the responsibility of parliamentary documentation. The participants would be designated by senior management of the respective departments. In order to improve management of the reporting process, another recommendation could be that author departments, as a matter of course, should identify the officers to whom they will assign the responsibility for specific documentation for the intergovernmental body or bodies governing the activities of the department. This would include: planning for preparation and processing, drafting documentation, ensuring timely clearance by the department for submission to OCS, coordinating with and responding to inquiries from OCS or the secretary of the body in question and providing additional information or assistance as required. It is anticipated that this approach would serve to develop the skills and abilities of staff and promote consistency in compliance with proper procedure and centralize and strengthen accountability in the reporting process overall.

B. Budgetary provision/staffing resources

Experience has now shown that OCS cannot function at the same level, much less meet increased demands, with its present reduced staffing structure. As part of the preparation of its budget, proposals for the biennium 1994-1995, OCS has investigated and will submit, as appropriate, proposals for budgetary provision that reflect the increased documentation-processing workload via the

appropriate combination of established posts, resources for contractual translation and related services, and provision for temporary assistance.

C. Forecasting/planning

OCS will continue to improve planning by intensifying its consultations and negotiations regarding meeting dates for eventual inclusion in the calendar of conferences and meetings, taking into account the Secretariat's ability as a whole to prepare and process documentation. This would include, inter alia, ensuring the application of relevant rules and regulations for control and limitation, vis-à-vis the rules, regulations and guidelines for scheduling meetings of intergovernmental bodies, seeking more accurate quantification of the volume of documentation for each intergovernmental body, and promoting greater reliability of forecasting information received. It is expected that once the most problematic areas and sectors in terms of regular late submission of documentation have been identified, the Secretariat, i.e., OCS in consultation with the relevant departments, would endeavour to determine the factors causing the problem and what steps could actively be taken jointly to alleviate the problem.

Concurrent with these activities and also based on their outcome, OCS will endeavour, in cooperation with author departments, to promote a programme for documentation forecasting and management to increase efficiency in the documentation process. By maintaining open channels of communication, particularly in an effort to keep apprised of changing needs, OCS hopes to further develop its "early warning system" that would allow it to improve its planning and scheduling of required resources for the documentation workload anticipated at any given time.

A/AC.172/1993/CRP.9
30 April 1993

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMITTEE ON CONFERENCES
Substantive session
17-21 May 1993
Agenda item 6*

APPLICATION OF NEW TECHNOLOGY TO CONFERENCE SERVICING

Note by the Secretariat

INTRODUCTION

1. During its 1990 and 1991 substantive sessions, the Committee on Conferences considered conference room papers (A/AC.172/1990/CRP.3 and A/AC.172/1991/CRP.7, respectively) on the application of new technology to conference servicing. The Committee noted that, in view of its responsibility to make recommendations on conference servicing world wide, it should be fully informed about present and planned applications of new technology not only at New York and Geneva, but also at all other United Nations conference centres and requested the Secretariat to prepare for its consideration a report that would include completed and updated information on applications of new technologies, present and planned, for all conference centres of the United Nations, including those at the Regional Commissions. The present note, prepared in consultation with all United Nations conference centres, is submitted in compliance with the request of the Committee. It supplements information contained in the report submitted to the Committee at its 1991 substantive session.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

2. The application of technological innovations within the Office of Conference Services (OCS) is carried out within the framework of Secretariat-wide policies and programmes established by the strengthened interdepartmental Technological Innovations Board (TIB); representatives of OCS will continue to participate actively in the work of the Board, its Working Committee and other

---

* A/AC.172/150/Add.1.

subsidiary bodies. OCS will also continue its close cooperation with the Office of General Services, which is responsible for planning and implementing telecommunications and technological innovations for the Organization, for providing overall policy and technical guidelines in matters relating to computers, office equipment and telecommunications and for enforcing standards set by the TIB.

3. The overall strategy of the Technological Innovations Programme (TIP) for OCS has two main goals:

(a) Increasing the cost-effectiveness of processes within OCS; and

(b) Enhancing the quality and timeliness of the services provided to Member States, delegations, Secretariat staff and others.

4. These goals can be realized only with the active participation of the managers in the divisions and organizational units. Managing the change that accompanies the introduction of technological innovations can be a formidable challenge. In addition to the challenge for managers, strong staff participation is necessary to apply the new technologies, to learn how to use new tools and to cope with the additional, albeit, inevitable, workload during the transition period. The concept of assigning "focal points" or "technical specialists" in each area where technological innovations are being introduced is intended to promote "user-involvement". At this point in time, the technical specialists provide day-to-day operational, administrative and "help desk" support to users of new technologies in their areas under the guidance of, and backed up by the expertise of, the staff in the TIP unit.

5. Productivity gains attributable to technological innovations in OCS were first achieved with the use of word-processing systems in the typing units, Forward Echelon and the Correspondence Unit. Between 1981 and 1987, the units at the United Nations Headquarters that had been converted to word processing surrendered 20 of 323 established posts and did not recruit against 2 temporary posts authorized for 1987. In that same year they reduced their temporary assistance staff for the General Assembly sessions from the planned number of 80 to 48, i.e. by 40 per cent. At the same time, their output in 1987 was about 21 per cent greater than in 1981. This reduction in temporary assistance requirements has continued; for the forty-seventh session of the General Assembly, only 46 temporary staff were requested for the pools. Despite a further reduction of 37 established posts during the retrenchment exercise in 1988-1989 - bringing the total savings in established posts to 18 per cent between 1980 and 1989 - the text-processing pools have been able to cope with a 13 per cent increase in workload between 1989 and 1991 with no loss in quality or timeliness of output. Headquarters took the lead in introducing word processing in Russian, Arabic and Chinese. Standards were developed, and close cooperation in this area is ongoing with the United Nations offices at Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi and the Regional Commissions.

6. The Document Recording, Information and Tracking System (DRITS), the computerized job scheduling, monitoring and tracking system for documents and publications processed by OCS, became fully operational on 1 July 1991 after an extensive adjustment and testing period of one year in parallel with the previous system, which was based on the multi-part D-2 form. In addition to registering, scheduling and tracking jobs, the system has considerable capabilities for inquiring and reporting. The database also produces managerial

planning and control reports, as well as basic statistical information on the workload of OCS. Bar code technology is used to facilitate easy and accurate tracking of jobs. All users of DRITS use standard IBM-compatible microcomputers to access the system.

7. The number of users is increasing steadily, and more and more author departments are connected to DRITS and can submit their document processing requests electronically. This expansion is limited by the capacity and speed of the present minicomputer on which DRITS runs; plans have been prepared to replace the machine in the near future. The implementation of the wiring and data network for the Secretariat will also contribute to easier access to DRITS by more users.

8. At the present time, Headquarters is providing assistance to Conference Services in Geneva to adopt the New York DRITS system and adjust it to run on Geneva's equipment and network. The experiences gained in New York are thus fully available to Geneva.

9. The introduction of DRITS led to a reduction of two clerical posts in each of the language services of the Translation and Editorial Division in the past two biennia. DRITS facilitates the planning and timely production of documents by providing supervisors with information on jobs in the pipeline, jobs in progress and jobs completed at each stage of processing. The system should thus lead to improvements in the timely distribution of documents to delegates, a matter of growing concern to Member States.

10. During 1991, the volume of work in Documents Control increased markedly. Up to and including 1989, the number of documents for processing remained fairly constant at a level of about 43,000 or 44,000 jobs per year. In 1990, close to 47,000 jobs were processed, reflecting an increase of 5.7 per cent in comparison with 1989. In 1991, an unprecedented level of over 57,600 jobs were processed, reflecting a further increase of 23 per cent over 1990. In 1990 and 1991, the number of permanent staff and the level of temporary assistance in Documents Control did not increase. Overtime hours worked increased only by 0.4 per cent in 1990 and by 7.6 per cent in 1991, much less than the total volume of work. The introduction of DRITS has thus enhanced productivity and efficiency in the documents processing sections.

11. The Verbatim Reporting Section has taken full advantage of technological innovations and most reporters are using personal computers to produce their draft documents. The word-processing system in the Section was finally linked with the computerized voting system in the General Assembly Hall. Voting records are now transmitted electronically and incorporated into verbatim reporting documents without having to be retyped. Tedious checking and rechecking of voting results by typists and editors has been drastically reduced.

12. In 1989, TIP introduced Optical Character Recognition (OCR) scanning technology in the Secretariat. The scanners have been used successfully to convert documents from paper into word-processing files without the need for retyping of the document. The most conspicuous and useful application of this technology is in the Verbatim Reporting Section, which has made arrangements to obtain advance copies of speeches from delegates. Using an OCR scanner on a personal computer, the Section is able to scan the advance copies of speeches into word-processing documents which can be given to verbatim reporters for

finalization and/or translation. During the 1991 General Assembly session, 4,000 pages were scanned, saving a considerable amount of time and speeding up the release of records.

13. Based on a study by external expert consultants, the Publishing Division embarked on the introduction of in-house desktop publishing in 1991. An Electronic Publishing Unit was established within the Printing Section and a few desktop publishing workstations were acquired for the Electronic Publishing Unit, the Graphics Presentation Unit and the Copy Preparation and Proofreading Unit. Intensive training by outside experts and self-training by staff of the units took place in 1991 and in 1992. At the same time, and increasingly so as training progresses, typesetting jobs are given to trained staff instead of being sent to external typesetters, saving approximately $15 to $25 per page in external costs. Initially, this process has been applied to the production of official records. Electronic typesetting of publications was planned to follow successful completion of the official records project. The Conference Services Division in Geneva has led the way in this area by introducing a minicomputer-based electronic typesetting system for publications in 1990. Desktop publishing techniques are also in use at all other duty stations of the United Nations as a natural consequence of the gradual introduction of personal computers for staff of conference service units throughout the Organization.

14. Bar code technology and a system for tracking jobs and collecting workload statistics in the Production Control Unit in the Printing Plant were started in the fall of 1991 as planned in the 1990-1991 biennium budget. A full tracking system with 34 bar code tracking stations was completed successfully in 1992.

15. The system produces standardized job tickets with bar codes for all production steps in the printing plant. Jobs can quickly be located throughout the plant, allowing managers and supervisors to monitor schedules and priority jobs. Statistical and management information will be automatically collected. The system is currently being expanded to use a local area network of PC workstations as a subsystem of the DRITS.

STRATEGY AND OVERALL PLAN FOR THE REMAINING BIENNIA IN THE MEDIUM-TERM PLAN 1992-1997

16. The application of new technologies to conference services is concentrated in two major areas:

(a) The production and distribution of documents in all official languages, and

(b) The planning, coordination and support of conferences and meetings at all United Nations duty stations and special conference sites around the world.

17. With the introduction of personal computer workstations and data networks across all document processing stages, the Office of Conference Services is striving towards a "paperless" electronic production of documents. The extension of this network to overseas locations as part of the United Nations communications and networking strategy will permit the electronic distribution of documents and facilitate better utilization of conference-servicing resources at all duty stations.

18. Work is under way to combine local conference and meetings planning activities into a joint global computer-assisted planning and scheduling system. As the United Nations telecommunications network is gradually expanded, tele- and video-conferencing techniques will become a reality and the use of remote translation, editing, referencing and interpretation services will be expanded.

19. It has become evident that the application of new technologies to conference services is an ongoing integral part of all conference planning and support functions. For the past 15 years, the medium-term plans and each biennial budget for conference services has included an allocation of approximately 1.5 to 2 per cent of the total conference services budget for technological innovations activities. Cost estimates and budgetary allocations for conference services at each duty station or at special conference sites around the world will need to include the technological innovations component to ensure the same level of standard common conference support services at all conference sites.

Current technological innovations activities

Optical Disk System

20. The parliamentary documentation, stored on line in databases at United Nations Headquarters, New York, and the United Nations Office at Geneva and described/indexed using the structure of the United Nations Bibliographic Information System (UNBIS), includes pre-session, in-session and post-session documentation for meetings and conferences of the Security Council, the General Assembly and its subsidiary bodies, the Economic and Social Council and its subsidiary bodies and the Trusteeship Council. The documents are stored in all official languages of the United Nations: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. Documents are stored to the greatest extent possible in coded form not only to reduce storage space requirements on the optical disk and accelerate transmission of documents through available communications lines but also to permit editors, translators and typists to reprocess texts retrieved from storage. The system started to store all Security Council documents in August 1992 and all Geneva documents from November 1992 onwards. All documents produced in Geneva and New York are planned to be available to users of the system from August 1993 onwards. It is planned to link all other conference sites of the United Nations for inputting and retrieval as soon as telecommunications facilities to these duty stations are upgraded.

21. Fully operational systems have been installed and the project has entered its second phase, which foresees the expansion of the document database to include all resolutions and decisions of the four main bodies of the United Nations back to 1946. As a priority in Phase II, missions of Member States in New York and Geneva will be given access to the system. This entails a gradual expansion of the capacity of the system to service a growing number of users at acceptable service levels and with adequate response time.

Document Recording, Information and Tracking System (DRITS)

22. Since 1991, several extensions of DRITS into specific processing areas such as translation services, the reproduction and distribution areas and the Printing Section are in progress. These subsystems will allow managers and supervisors to monitor work in progress in their areas of responsibility, while using the same job information and bar code tracking technology as DRITS.

23. The Conference Services Division in Geneva is in the process of making DRITS operational with the active assistance of the staff of the Technological Innovations Programme, New York, and by transferring New York's experience with DRITS directly to Geneva.

24. The United Nations Environment Programme at Nairobi and the United Nations Office at Vienna have developed their own production tracking and monitoring systems. The Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications has been used to share the New York DRITS experience and achievements with representatives of other duty stations and specialized agencies.

Networking and communications

25. An electronic mail network is fully operational in OCS. It is linked to and integrated with the Secretariat-wide electronic mail system. TIP is currently working on enhancing the use of the network for the easy transmission of documents, in particular in WordPerfect format, between users in New York and between New York and overseas duty stations.

26. The DRITS network was expanded by a modem connection which allows UNDP and UNICEF to access DRITS via the public telephone network. This connection also permits TIP staff to provide assistance after business hours by diagnosing and resolving problems remotely from personal computers at home.

27. Facsimile devices were acquired for a number of users throughout OCS. During the biennia 1990-1991 and 1992-1993, facsimile machines were installed in the Printing Section, in the Coordination and Records Unit, in the Official Records Editing Section, in the Office of the Director for Conference Services, in the Publications Board's secretariat, in the Planning and Meetings Servicing Section, in the Contractual Translation Unit, in the Meetings Servicing Unit, in Forward Echelon, in the Verbatim Reporting Section, in the Document Referencing and Terminology Section and in the Journal Unit.

Conversion from Wang to WordPerfect

28. The Journal Unit was the first unit to convert to the new word-processing standard of the Secretariat. The desktop publishing features of the new software WordPerfect have improved the readability and appearance of the Journal. The Journal is also transmitted to the Department of Public Information (DPI) each day and is available to missions and Secretariat staff electronically through DPI's UNPRESS/JOURNAL on-line database on the Secretariat's mainframe. Facsimile communications enable offices to transmit their submissions for the Journal more easily and more promptly.

29. A plan for the transition of the typing pools, Forward Echelon, the Verbatim Reporting Section and the Correspondence Unit to the new word-processing standard has been completed and will be in place by the summer of 1993.

On-screen editing

30. In 1992, the Editorial Control and the Official Records Editing Section started to use personal computer workstations for on-screen editing and computerized referencing. It is now possible to envisage a seamless flow of

work from verbatim reporters and typists through editors, both in OCS and substantive offices, to the electronic publishing stations in the Publishing Division without the need to retype parts or all of a document because of editorial or other changes.

Machine-assisted translation

31. The introduction of some personal computer workstations in all Services has resulted in an enthusiastic response in adapting and effectively using this technology for machine-assisted translation. The Documentation, Reference and Terminology Section is working closely with all Services to share solutions in the referencing and terminology areas. At the same time, the workstations were selected and designed to be connected to the optical disk system.

Conference planning and interpreter assignment

32. Work on the computerized database of conferences and meetings is continuing in the Planning and Meetings Servicing Section. Meanwhile, the same database is being used by the Interpretation Service to schedule interpreters and determine their assignments to specific meetings. The interpreter assignment programme has been in full use in the Interpretation Service since April 1991. This application is the first project using a true expert system or artificial intelligence system approach, since it required the transfer of all rules, formal and informal, and all exceptional decisions which were used by the Programming Officer to schedule and assign interpreters into a computer programme. This system produces valuable planning, managerial and statistical information for the Service.

33. The computer programs for conference planning and interpreter assignment have been made available to Geneva and are being assessed by the Conference Services Division in Geneva to enable that Division to benefit from the experience gained with these systems at Headquarters.